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Sent in Lieu of Speech: On the Indescribable Work of Albert Stabler

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Sent in Lieu of Speech:
On the Indescribable Work of Albert Stabler

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I have had the great pleasure of writing several letters of recommendation for Albert (Bert) Stabler. By far the letters I write for Bert at the easiest. I can sit down and—in minutes—put down three to four pages of sincere and deep reflections on what Bert Stabler's work, persona, and scholarship do for the fields of art education, art, pedagogy, and critical studies. I have great admiration for him. So there was little hesitation in me when I was asked to suggest one of our graduate students for the 2015 Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education session in Chicago.

That same year I wrote an extensive letter for Bert as he was applying for a dissertation fellowship from the College of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Illinois. The Kinley Fellowship is a highly competitive fellowship, and although I knew Bert's work was worthy of it, I was nervous that I wouldn't be able to represent what I felt about Bert's work in the short window that I was given to describe it. Bert's work can be spoken about, but it is mostly indescribable. I wrote the justification for why Bert should receive the fellowship as if I was writing a scholarly paper. I treaded it and retreaded it until it was right, in terms of literary economy, poetics, and poignancy. To be honest, as careful as I was with that letter's writing, I know that I failed to show Bert in the light that he truly deserves. Thank God he won the fellowship!

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Now that I'm in a position to introduce Bert's Zurmuehlen paper in this journal, I go back to that letter I wrote for Bert. I present it here for your examination as an insufficient introduction to a scholar who you will only get to know, by actually getting to know him.

To Whom It May Concern:

If it could ever be said that it appears that someone comes to what they do naturally, Albert Stabler (Bert) would be the one.

It is not merely appearances though. As Bert's advisor and long time colleague, I'm writing this letter to speak about the unnaturalness of Bert Stabler's accomplishments, his unstoppable work ethic, and the immeasurable potential that I'm asking you to support by accepting him. I have seen how hard he works to place himself in the best position to help and guide others, to provide platforms of agency for the oppressed, as well as produce work that has a reach far beyond the boundaries of one-on-one encounters.

Bert is a one-of-a-kind art teacher, researcher, and artist, and his work—with the right support—will continue to have important implications, not only in terms of policy, pedagogy, and action, but also in terms of poetic resonance and generativity. The strength of Bert's work is that it is both public pedagogy and robust art simultaneously.

What is it that makes Bert one of a kind? I firmly believe that he would be teaching, researching, and making art even if he had zero institutional support, incentive, or pressure to do so. This is Bert's life's work and he's going to do it no matter what.

How do I know this? Bert Stabler has consistently demonstrated the true intentions for why he does what he does. He doesn't teach because it's a job. He teaches because he understands teaching to be a gesture of social justice and democracy.

Although Bert's research is gaining attention and contributing to several fields' discourses, he doesn't conduct his research for the sake of prestige or even to add to the critical literature of critical studies. He works so hard at his research projects because the ideas—almost—consume him. He loves to read, discuss, and hold up the density of theory to the light of everyday life. Bert is interested in his research touching the lives of individuals, particularly individuals who have lived under oppression and discrimination for decades.

On this final thought, Bert doesn't make art because he's devoted to aesthetics strictly. Although he is a skilled and refined craftsman, he makes art because he understands the power of media and material and Bert knows how

art creates another level of social literacy and agency for viewers, participants, and students. He knows how art empowers. Bert's art transcends strict concerns about object-making and serves as a bridge for differences to be highlighted, pondered, and maybe even brought into a coexistence that is as harmonious as we might dream it to be.

Although, I'm positive that Bert's work comes from a personal passion and will continue no matter what, I'm writing today to encourage you to reward his previous sacrifice and bolster his ability to continue this work with the encouraging knowledge that a group of colleagues, such as yourselves, agrees with how worthy this work is.

Without exaggeration there are maybe one hundred examples of Bert's work that would illustrate the type of affect this scholar has on the creative, educational, and justice lives of others. I can talk about the curriculum work that Bert has done through the Educational Justice Project at the Danville Correctional Center. I could write about an edited issue of *Proximity*, a Chicago social-issues periodical that Bert curated and wrote for in an attempt to tease out the stories of the sometimes anemic conditions that the Chicago Public Schools find themselves in. This journal isn't pessimistic though; it turns to the arts to ask the question: What can be done if we all work together to make things better? I could also display countless examples of art and social practice projects that Bert conducted with his students during his ten-year stint as a Chicago Public School teacher on the far south side of the city. These student projects centered around young people's real concerns with homelessness, police brutality, school bullying, popular culture, and government housing. This school-work is astounding and has been written about in several contemporary art education books. I could also cite a pile of papers and articles that have been published or are in review at the moment to demonstrate how Bert has translated all of this making and doing into theory that is both rich and pragmatic. His current thesis is around a mode of art making called "legislative art," a form of art that aims to bring life and art closer to each other by bringing together oppressed communities, legislators, and artists in order to create tangible, undeniable, instances of justice and restoration.

But describing all of that work in detail requires a letter far longer than this one and even then I'm uncertain whether I could do Bert's work justice.

It's no secret that I admire Bert's work tremendously. I consider him a colleague more than I do a student. And it is because of this, because I can see myself working with Bert for years to come that I am struck to my core with some of his sculptures. Bert's sculpture is perhaps least noticed because it is not as portable and consumable as some of his other work. We can examine

his teaching and projects through the work narrative and the testimony of his students. We can read his writing. We can see pictures of his drawings. But it is very difficult to get a grasp of Bert's sculptures without seeing them in the flesh. Nevertheless I will try because I feel that this particular work captures both the heart, the work ethic, and the spirit of what Bert is doing in all of his work.

Bert made an artwork called Mallory Owens vs. the Void. It is a large sculpture constructed of three box fans, stuck to each other, and with their protective grates removed. These three fans are nestled in between what appears to be two large planks of wood. The fans are plugged in and are set at high speed. They're blowing a tremendous wind. When you come around the side of the sculpture you notice that these two planks are—in fact—two crosses resting on the floor with crudely drilled bolts exposed. As you sense the force, rattle, and roar of the sculpture, you notice that—suspended—in the howl of this wind tunnel is a small figurine. The figurine is made of FEMO, a play-doh like material that is normally used in schools to develop children's fine motor skills. This figurine is Mallory Owens. Mallory Owens is a young woman who was brutally beaten by her girlfriend's brother one Thanksgiving evening. Bert made this piece as part of a series of unconventional memorials to young LGBTQ people who suffered violence for who they are. In the sculpture Mallory is suspended in the "void" as she is deafened by the ferocity of this perpetual collision. It is aimed at her and she is both violated by it and perseverant against it.

So much of Bert's work teeters on this thin line of creating empathy and frustration simultaneously. The empathy helps us to not forget and the frustration makes us run from our passivity. Bert's art, his writing, and his teaching all carries this sensation and the work demonstrates—vehemently—that Bert, as a maker, thinker, and activist is "excellent of personality, serious of purpose, and great of moral character". Albert Stabler is doing all this as his life's work, which is now intertwined with the academy and as much as that is to our benefit, it is also—now—our responsibility.

For sure there is a wealth of deserving candidates for this position. What distinguishes Bert is how his work reverberates in so many directions. I ask you to magnify that reverberation with by bringing him into your midst. You will not regret it. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

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